

Victoria Claflin Woodhull

1838–1927



WHY SHE MADE HISTORY Victoria Claflin Woodhull was the first woman to run a stock brokerage firm, and the first woman to run for president of the United States.



As you read the biography below, think about the ways in which Victoria Woodhull was a pioneer. How did she pave the way for women of future generations?



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In the late 1800s, women began entering the workforce in numbers greater than ever before. Some women attended college and began looking for challenging careers outside the home. Many jobs, however, were not open to women. Nevertheless, some women refused to let their gender stand in the way of success.

An original thinker and reformer, Victoria Claflin Woodhull was born into a poor family in 1838. At 15 she married Dr. Canning Woodhull and had two children. After working in the theater, Woodhull joined her sister, Tennessee, running a traveling medicine and fortune-telling show. Woodhull was a very spiritual person and claimed she could heal sick people by touching them. This career eventually made her wealthy.

In 1865, Woodhull divorced her first husband and the next year married Civil War hero James Harvey Blood, who introduced her to many of the reform movements she would embrace. Two years later, the couple, together with Tennessee and the Claflin family, moved to New York City where the sisters met railroad tycoon Cornelius Vanderbilt.

Following Vanderbilt's advice, Woodhull made a small fortune in the Gold Exchange, then opened the first stock brokerage firm run by a woman. Later she said the brokerage was part of her plan to further her political and reform ideas. She also started a newspaper called *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly*. The newspaper promoted Woodhull's political career, equal rights for women, and other controversial causes. The progressive weekly was also the first to publish an English translation of Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, a guide to the basic practices of communism.

Woodhull was a radical reformer who fought for women's rights. She also had big political plans. In 1872 she announced that she was running for president of the United States. Woodhull organized her own convention and was nominated by the newly established Equal Rights Party, a group of

The Progressives

Biography

people who wanted government reform. She ran on a platform that supported labor reform, financial regulation, women's suffrage, and an end to government interference in women's private lives.

Before the presidential election, Woodhull published an exposé about a powerful religious leader that included accusations about the man's personal affairs. Woodhull was arrested under the Comstock Act for sending offensive material through the mail. She spent election day in jail and received no votes.

By 1876 Woodhull had lost much of the support she had found in her earlier years. She and Blood divorced, her newspaper shut down, and her career as a reformer in the United States was over. She moved to England where she married a wealthy banker. She continued to write and became known there as a philanthropist.

Though Woodhull never fulfilled her goals as a reformer, she achieved numerous successes that were unusual for women of her time.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Describe** When did Victoria Woodhull run for president? What kind of programs and ideas did she support?

2. **Draw Conclusions** Why might Victoria Woodhull be considered ahead of her time? Explain.

ACTIVITY

Victoria Woodhull accomplished several firsts for women. Write a short essay about what she achieved and how her example might have made a difference for women then and how it might make a difference now.